

Global Migration Patterns in M.G. Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song*

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The south Asian migrants, or their ancestors, left the subcontinent as part of various migration patterns. In general, four currents of South Asian migration are emphasised. Each of these current has had its own specific background, characteristics, and conditions. These patterns differed in the way the Indian culture was reproduced abroad and how they were received by them and the host societies. They also differed in age, numbers, and the historical contexts in which they emerge. In some areas they have lived for six or more generations while in some nations they have arrived very recently while in some other areas they have also emerged to be politically and economically dominant.

The first and eldest migration flow was that of traders who left the South Asian subcontinent long before in search of trade and business. The Indian coastal communities developed profitable ties with East Asia, East Africa and Central Asia on the basis of trade and business. This was termed 'trade diaspora' and it was considered temporary since their main concern was to eventually return. The second important migration pattern was that of Indian Indentured labourers who left to replace the freed slaves in the nineteenth century plantation economies. Most of these labourers intended to return but they ended up staying creating new homelands abroad. The main difference between both these migrants is that this diaspora was forced and not voluntary like the trade diaspora. The main focus has been on travel, living conditions, nature of contract and work, and the prospects of return. Some Indians migrated as clerks and teachers to serve the Colonial Government where Indians were seen collaborating with the British.

The third type of migration took place after the Second World War. Mutual migration was seen between Hindus and Muslims between India and Pakistan. Many highly educated professionals left India in search of jobs in Europe, UK, US, and Canada. Recently many IT professionals have also migrated in search of a better future. Some of them have been temporary migrants while some did not return. During the post-war period a fourth pattern also developed that of twice migrants who were expelled from East Africa and ended up settling in the UK or Canada. They left their host countries for political rather than economic reasons. They might have returned to their homeland but the economic political and their familial ties sent them elsewhere. They never considered returning to their motherland as their choice and this group constituted a vast group comprising traders, labourers, as well as professionals. These migration patterns differ in very many forms like the causes and consequences of migration, whether it led to permanent settlement, or return to their motherland, or whether it led to higher generation of Indian Migrants as opposed to intermarriages and cultural exchanges. The migrants though termed as Indians or

South Asians are categorised based on their religion, ethnicity, language and region leading to differences in food, clothing making them distinct in every aspect.

The concept of migration takes into account the groups of people who are 'deterritorialised' or 'transnational' whose cultural origin are said to have arisen in a nation other than the one in which they currently reside and whose social, political networks cross nation - state borders and span the entire globe. This is related to Diaspora as it takes in two extreme opposite meanings referring to the specific migration of the Jews and a more universal concept of migration and settlement beyond the borders of native nation state irrespective of the migration circumstances. As the concept of diaspora has matured it has assumed at least three specific meanings according to a critic Steven Vertovec (2000). diaspora is considered as a social form, as a type of consciousness and as a cultural production.

The diaspora as a social reform refers to the process of becoming scattered. It draws on the Jewish model and it looks at how social ties were cemented at the process of maintaining a collective identity at the institutionalising networks, and at the social and economic strategies as a transnational group. It also focuses on their political orientations, their inability- or unwillingness- to be accepted by the host society .It can be characterised as a triangular relationship between a) the globally dispersed yet strongly transnational organised group b) the territorial states where groups reside and c) the Indian state or imagined homeland.

The diaspora as a type of consciousness emphasises the variety of experiences, a state of mind and a sense of identity. This is described in a dual and a paradoxical nature. It has various connotations. First it refers to the experience of discrimination and exclusion and at the same time the positive identification with the highly praised historical heritage of notion of civilization . Second the awareness of multi-locality, that of belonging 'here and there' as well as sharing the same 'roots and routes'. The awareness of the ability to make a connection, here and there, making the bridge between the local and the global, are its certain traits. Third, in addition to the identification with the host society , and the homeland there is the identification with the locality also.

The diaspora as a mode of cultural production emphasises the currents of cultural objects, images, and meanings, back and forth, and the way these transcend, creolise and change, according to the wishes of the customers and artists. It refers to the production and reproduction of transnational, social and cultural phenomenon. They are at cross currents of cultural fields and they receive and transform new ideas and developments. People in diaspora are part of both a global history and a local history.

This paper has taken into study *The Assassin's Song*(2007) by M.G. Vassanji, born in Kenya and brought up in Kenya. He then went on to London and later to the US and finally settled in Canada later. He also had an Indian ancestral background. This is his first novel to have India as its background. It is set in the state of Gujarat. Until this novel, all the other novels were set in East-Africa, US and Canada. India has only then featured in the past or in the memory of the characters. His characters in the novels and in the short stories were essentially Indian or African or Canadian or African Asian. The themes of displacement,

dislocation, migration are all prevalent in his works. The paper analyses the theme of migration at various levels and how it develops and brings about changes in the lives of the characters. The themes of transnationalism, conditions of migration and diaspora are also dealt with in this paper. Since these themes are closely related to cosmopolitanism, Vassanji is considered to be a postcolonial cosmopolitan writer. Cosmopolitanism, since its early beginnings in Greek philosophy has concerned itself with questions of responsibility and philanthropy (Sellers 131). Bruce Robins observes that there has been a change in its perception.

Understood as a fundamental devotion to the interests of humanity as a whole, cosmopolitanism has often seemed to claim universally by virtue of its independence ... (B)ut many voices insist... that the terms should be extended to transnational experiences that are particular rather than universal and that are unprivileged. (1)

Indeed in support of this claim, Robins adds Benita Parry's statement that there is now an "emergent postcolonial cosmopolitanism" due to the global flow of transnational cultural traffic (1). Although the Greek understanding of the citizen of the world as well as the image of the jet-setter cosmopolitan are still present, cosmopolitanism has, in the wake of global phenomenon such migration, come to be discussed more frequently in a postcolonial framework. In this light Homi.K.Bhabha in his 2002 volume has opined that, "refugees, peoples of the diaspora, and the migrants and exiles represent the spirit of the cosmopolitical community" (582). In this sense postcolonial cosmopolitanism refers to the migrant's experience of dislocation, loss and sense of belonging, as well as to the ethical discussion that accompanies these experiences: to which nation does one allegiance? When they have left their homelands and their families, who is one responsible for? And questions relating to one's community and the like.

The novel's transnational frameworks, concepts of migration, diaspora, its concern with a minority community, its localised, multiple locations solidarity and secularism constitute elements of postcolonial cosmopolitanism. The historical and the political perspectives serve as the contextual factors in the novel.

The novel tells the story of Nur Fazal, a mysterious thirteenth century Sufi saint and his successors, the sahebs of Pirbaag. Pirbaag, the garden of the Pir, the shrine of the wanderer, a sufi. The story begins with the arrival of a wandering Muslim mendicant and scholar Nur Fazal from Afghanistan or Persia to Gujarat in A.D. 1260. This 'impure' muslim, Nur Fazal, is taken to be a spy. But he comes to Patan because, "it is known far and wide outside Hindustan as a haven of tolerance" (10). He knows that King Vishal Dev welcomes poets and philosophers without caste discrimination and encourages conferences and debates. So Nur Fazal gains entry into Dev's palace with his feats. He also joins the assemblies of the learned men, commands a grudging respect (16) and wins an abode, Pirbaag, in the kingdom (24). It is because of his sharp features and keen intellect that the sufi is also called Kaatil or Killer (3). As he tends his followers like seedlings, he is also called the Gardener.

There are several parallels between the lives of Karsan who has gone to Boston, and Nur Fazal. Both have fled their homelands and both arrive in the cities of learning. Nur Fazal lands in the city of Patan Anularra, of which it used to be said that “there was not a city within a thousand miles to match its splendour...It boasted the foremost linguist, mathematician. .thousands of students came to study at the feet of its teachers” (7).Karsan comes “to the legendary ivy-covered university”(183)to which he arrived “almost by accident”(183).The legends of Nur Fazal and his adventures are passed down to the generations.The wanderer comes from Persia or Afghanistan. The implications of the character’s lives with religious political violence and its harsh condemnation by the narrator, indicate that The Assassin’s Song negotiates and stages the horrors of communal violence. Nur Fazal belonged to the sect of the Assassins before becoming a guru.These violent events echo the present violent happenings, in which Mansoor, Karsan’s brother becomes part of a radicalised muslim group after his father’s death during the 2002 Gujarat riots.Karsan describes the bleak situation :

But now the shrine lies in ruins, a victim of the violence that so gripped our state recently...only rats visit the Sufi now, to root among the ruins...my brother militantly calls himself a Muslim and is wanted for questioning regarding a horrific crime.(5)

The significance of his father’s death is manifold.Not only Karsan not able to reunite with him, he has also nominally become the new sahib, the lord of the shrine a fate he now accepts after having run from it for many years. At the same time,however, it is only his experience of migration and the feeling of loss and lack of belonging that accompanied the last years of his life in Canada that enable him to accept this role.His belief in secularism, coupled with an atheistic sense gives him a sense of responsibility towards the shrine and its community and so, despite his scepticism he decides to accept his father’s succession. Thus a cosmopolitan ethics of responsibility and solidarity is foregrounded in Karsan’s life.Karsan felt the dread of succeeding his father and hence fled to Boston from haripir.The past has a very real influence on Karsan’s life and he feels the burden of history heavy on his shoulders.Karsan comes to terms with his family roots and the traditions are passed on from father to son and these traditions are shown to have come from somewhere from medieval times brought forward to the present narrative in the twentieth century. Due to migration in the present scenario the members of this transnational community are spread all over the globe. Thus the novel is positioned locally and globally.

Vassanji uses the bol, the secret mantra, also called Assassin’s Song, as the key to the narrative. The song is an embodiment of history or a repository of the past that moves the novel from A.D.1260 to August 2002. It is a means of communication between the successor (Sahebs) of Pirbaag. The song is a logic of creation that preserves universal values to restructure the present. It also connects the Sahebs to their past. The song provides a positive energy and helps resist negativities and injustices. It enables the ancient Indian Civilization to recover from frequent outbreaks of violence (346). The song thus becomes a complex embodiment of history. The ginans are devotional songs that express the desire of the union with

God. Karsan compares this song with that of the metaphysical poetry who used extended metaphors as found in devotional poems when in Harvard and writes to his father with enthusiasm and begins to reevaluate his origins. Karsan feels happy while recollecting these songs, at the same time he also feels that his son should be free from this burden of ancestry. This shows his ambivalent stance.

The pictures of local and global scenario, the East and West encounter, the burden of history, the intertwining of the past and the present, render a complex diversity to the novel. The study pictures the ambivalent position of life and the characters who slowly transform into world citizens.

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